

CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES REVIEW FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Florida was the eleventh State to participate in a Child and Family Services Review (CFSR). This review was conducted in accordance with section 1123(A) of the Social Security Act and sections 1355.31 through 1355.37 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). The U.S Department of Health and Human Services, through the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), is charged with the responsibility for reviewing federally-funded child and family services programs to determine the States' substantial conformity with State plan requirements and other requirements under Titles IV-B and IV-E of the Act.

The CFSR is a process in which ACF, in partnership with States, monitors and evaluates child and family services, including child protective services, family preservation and support, foster care, independent living and adoption services. The first phase of the CFSR consisted of the development of a State Profile, derived from data for Federal Fiscal Year (FFY) 1999 contained in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and for calendar year 1999 from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS). The profile highlighted key performance indicators related to safety and permanency for children entering the child welfare system. From this profile and other sources of information, Florida developed a Statewide Assessment (SWA), which described the process, procedures and policies of its child protective services, including foster care and adoption. This SWA also focused on the systemic factors in place, which enable the State to carry out the program.

The second phase involved an on-site review, conducted in three counties and in the capital city of Tallahassee the week of August 6, 2001. The purpose of the on-site review was to assess the quality of services to abused or neglected children and to verify the information contained in the State Profile and SWA. This was accomplished by an intensive examination of 50 cases, drawn at random, of children who were active in the system during the period under review (April 1, 2000 through August 5, 2001). The cases were divided between foster care and protective service (in-home) cases.

Forty-two reviewers and team leaders, operating in two-person (State/Federal) teams, reviewed and rated the services provided these children and their families, in relationship to the three goals of safety, permanency and well-being. The ratings were derived from documentation in the case records as well as from interviews with those involved with the cases, such as parents, caseworkers, foster parents, service providers and, when appropriate, the children themselves.

Individual and group interviews were also held in the four sites with more than 100 selected stakeholders who had the knowledge and experience to describe and assess the child and family services system. They included foster parents, judges, district attorneys, defense attorneys, caseworkers and their supervisors, guardians ad litem, police, and advocacy group representatives. The primary purpose of these interviews was to assess independently the quality and efficacy of the systemic factors described in the SWA.

The results of the SWA, the on-site case reviews, and the stakeholder interviews were compiled by the review team into this report. They were used to make a determination about Florida's substantial conformity with regard to each of seven outcomes related to safety, permanency and well-being, and each of seven systemic factors. Substantial conformity is based upon the State's ability to meet national standards, the criteria related to outcomes for children and families, and the criteria related to the State agency's capacity to deliver services leading to improved outcomes. Ninety percent of the cases must be rated as "substantially achieved" during a State's initial review for the State to be in substantial conformity for the outcomes.

The review team found both strengths and areas needing improvement in the Florida child welfare system. The review determined that the State was operating in substantial conformity with applicable Federal requirements on one of the seven outcomes and with five of the seven systemic factors. For children in foster care, the review team found several individual strengths in the Department's efforts to preserve the continuity of family relationships and connections, place children in close proximity to their families and with their siblings when possible, preserve important connections for the children, and utilize relatives as placement resources (all pertaining to permanency outcome 2). The State met the national standards for foster care re-entries and length of time to achieve adoption (foster care re-entries national standard 8.6% with State's percentage 5.4% - length of time to achieve adoption national standard 32% with State's percentage 43.4%). Additionally, the review documented areas of strengths in five of the systemic factors reviewed: the statewide information system; the quality assurance system; training; agency responsiveness to the community; and foster and adoptive parent licensing, recruitment, and retention.

The review identified needs for improvement in the areas of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment timely, addressing recurrence of maltreatment, and addressing risk of harm to children (pertaining to safety outcomes 1 & 2). Needs for improvement were also identified in terms of providing children with permanency and stability in their living situations (permanency outcome 1), and in all three well-being outcomes: that families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs, that children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs, and that children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs. Additionally, the systemic factors of case review system and service array are areas noted as being in need of improvement.

KEY FINDINGS RELATING TO SAFETY, PERMANENCY AND WELL-BEING

In order for the State to be determined to be in substantial conformity on any given outcome, the outcome must be determined to be substantially achieved in 90 percent of the cases reviewed in the first review. In addition, the State must meet the national standard that has been established for any statewide aggregate data attached to that particular outcome.

1. SAFETY

Status of Safety Outcomes: Not in Substantial Conformity

Safety Outcome 1

Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect

Florida does not meet the national standards in repeat maltreatment and maltreatment of children in foster care. 85.7% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved. 85.7 % of the cases were rated as strengths in timeliness of initiating investigations of reports of child maltreatment, while 91.8% of the cases reviewed were rated as strengths in the area of repeat maltreatment.

Strengths:

- Record reviews indicated that the systems are in place to ensure the timeliness of informing child protection workers of incoming reports of child maltreatment, and examples were identified of appropriate prompt decisions being made to ensure the safety of children.
- There were indications that the State's point rating system assists in identifying higher risk cases, ensuring that priority attention is given to the most vulnerable children while also focusing on the serious backlogs of child abuse and neglect cases that exist.

Areas Needing Improvement:

- Case record reviews indicated that timely initiation of investigation and results of risk assessment are lacking in some of the records reviewed.
- Record reviews in some of the cases revealed failure to arrange timely face to face contacts with children.
- Interviews with stakeholders revealed that higher caseloads and worker turnover impact timeliness of responding to reports of child maltreatment.

- A data discrepancy occurred in the performance indicator, Repeat Maltreatment. The National Standard is 6.1%. Florida's percentage for this indicator was 6.19%. Out of the forty-seven applicable cases reviewed onsite, repeat maltreatment was rated as strength in forty-three cases (91.5%). In order to resolve this discrepancy, the State would have had to submit current data to show that the rate of repeat maltreatment now meets the national standard of 6.1%. ACF Regional office informed the State of this discrepancy. The State submitted additional data that after review by the ACF central office, which included discussions with the State, was found to be incomplete and not meeting the National Standard for Repeat Maltreatment. Therefore, this item is categorized, as an Area Needing Improvement.

Safety Outcome 2

Children are safely maintained in their homes whenever possible and appropriate.

Status of Safety Outcome 2: Not in Substantial Conformity

78% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

- Record reviews and interviews with stakeholders revealed that standard and services are in place to address children's safety, both for in-home and foster care placements.
- There were indications that when risk is present, agency makes concerted efforts to exhaust all possible avenues to provide support and services prior to removing children from their homes.
- Interviews with stakeholders revealed that coordination exists between the Department and service providers as well as case managers and clinicians to determine, arrange and schedule services (child care, education, behavioral assessments).

Areas Needing Improvement:

- Record reviews indicated there were instances when the Department did not conduct an adequate risk assessment or provide adequate monitoring to determine parental compliance with service requirements.
- Interviews with stakeholders revealed that staff turnover impacts continuity of services to families.
- Stakeholders also expressed a need for more extensive and accessible treatment programs for alcohol and drug abuse clients.

II. PERMANENCY

Permanency Outcome 1 Children will have permanency and stability in their living situation

Status of Permanency Outcome 1: Not in Substantial Conformity

Florida met the national standards on foster care re-entries and length of time to achieve adoption, the State did not meet the national standards on length of time to achieve reunification and the stability of foster care placements. In addition, only 75.9% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

- A data discrepancy occurred in the performance indicator, Stability of Foster Care Placements. The National Standard is 86.7%. Florida's percentage for this indicator was 20.52%. Out of the twenty-nine applicable cases reviewed onsite, stability of foster care placements was rated as strength in twenty-six cases (90%). In order to resolve this discrepancy, the State would have had to submit current data to show that the rate of stability of foster care placements now meets the national standard of 86.7%. ACF Regional office informed the State of this discrepancy. The State submitted additional data that after review by the ACF Central office, which included discussions with the State, was found to be not appropriate and not meeting the National Standard for Stability in Foster Care Placement. Therefore, this item is categorized, as an Area Needing Improvement.

Strengths:

- Record reviews revealed that there were no multiple re-entries of children into foster care during the period under review.
- There were indications that relative placements contributed to the lower rate of re-entries into foster care, and that adequate services were put in place to help stabilize placements.
- Reviewers noted that permanency goals were achieved within 12 months for several of the cases reviewed in one of the sites.
- Reviewers noted that efforts were made to provide independent living services to youths in care. Record reviews indicated that IL plans were put into place in 2 out of 4 applicable records reviewed.
- There were indications that petitions and hearings for TPR are being filed and scheduled in a timely manner.

- Reviewers noted that efforts were made to implement other planned permanent living arrangements, such as, guardianship and long term relative care.

Area Needing Improvement:

- Interviews with stakeholders revealed lack of sufficient placement facilities for youths.
- There were indications that caseworkers encountered difficulties in finding adequate placements and services for adolescents.
- Record reviews and interviews with stakeholders indicated lack of adequate preparation given to children who experienced movements in foster care.
- Stakeholders identified need for additional IL services, as well as other services available for youth.
- Adoption was rated, as needs improvement in 3 of the 10 applicable cases reviewed (30%).
- Stakeholders commented on the need to establish Long Term Relative Placement goal for children who are not suitable for adoption or reunification.
- Reviewers noted that lack of mental health services in one site, posed a barrier to reunification in some of the cases reviewed.

Permanency Outcome 2

The continuity of family relationships and connections will be preserved for children

Status of Permanency Outcome 2: Substantial Conformity

89.7% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

- Record reviews indicated that placement efforts were based on the child's needs and his/her connections. Reviewers noted that concerted efforts were made to facilitate placements in the same community.
- There were indications that the agency recognizes the importance of placing children together.
- Reviewers indicated that strong efforts were made to maintain connections with the child's neighborhood, community, family, friends and school.

- Stakeholders attributed strong use of relatives as caretaker to the agency's relative caregiver program.

Area Needing Improvement:

- In one of the review sites, stakeholders commented on the need to recruit more foster parents in the neighborhoods where children in foster care are coming from.
- Stakeholders identified the need to recruit more foster parents who can accommodate large siblings groups.
- In another site, Stakeholders expressed the need for improvement in communication when children are placed in other counties and out of State.
- Record reviews indicated that there were concerns that relationship between teenagers and their parents were not strongly maintained.

III. CHILD AND FAMILY WELL-BEING

Well-Being Outcome 1

Families will have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs

Status of Well-Being Outcomes: Not in Substantial Conformity

62% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

- Record reviews indicated examples of adequate services being provided to the child, parents and foster parents.
- Reviewers noted a broad consistent involvement of families, foster parents, relatives, and lawyers in case planning activities.
- There were indications that worker visits with parents are more effective and frequent in those cases managed by community-based contractors.

Areas Needing Improvement:

- Record reviews identified absence of adequate assessments in some of the in-home cases reviewed.
- Stakeholders revealed the negative impact of worker turnover and high caseloads on case planning activities.

- Record reviews revealed inconsistency in worker visits with parents in some of the records reviewed.

Well-Being Outcome 2
Children receive appropriate services to meet their educational needs

Status of Well-Being Outcomes: Not in Substantial Conformity

78.9% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

- There were indications that foster parents and relative caretakers were strong advocates for children and frequently addressed education in several cases reviewed.
- Case reviews revealed that case managers made efforts to visit children in their school settings, and in cases where school attendance was an issue they also visited the home to ensure that the child was attending school.
- There were indications that the agency made efforts to keep children in the same school, and waivers are available. DCF makes education related transportation arrangements for children when they have to change foster care placements.

Areas Needing Improvement:

- Record reviews and interviews with stakeholders indicated that educational needs were not adequately assessed or addressed in some of the cases reviewed.
- Reviewers noted a lack of testing and evaluation of the children's educational needs in those cases.
- In one of the review sites, there were indications that educational issues were not consistently addressed in the case plan of some of the case records.
- Stakeholders commented on the need by the case managers to take more active role in advocating for the educational needs of children in their care.

Well-Being Outcome 3
Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs

Status of Well-Being Outcomes: Not in Substantial Conformity

74% of the cases reviewed were rated as substantially achieved.

Strengths:

- There were indications in most of the records reviewed that case managers gave adequate attention to the physical health of children, one being the Child Protection Team obtaining initial medical examinations for children when they enter foster care, including HIV tests.
- Record reviews indicated that adequate attention is given to the required annual medical examinations of children in foster care.
- There were indications that specialized foster homes meet the needs of children with exceptional health issues and monitor their progress.
- Reviewers found several good examples of in-home mental health services being provided and in some cases, case managers are diligent about getting services.
- There were indications in some of the records reviewed that children in foster care have their mental health needs met.

Areas Needing Improvement:

- Stakeholders reported difficulties in obtaining Medicaid cards and services for some of the children in foster care.
- Reviewers found little documentation of medical history or medical services, other than immunizations, in some of the cases reviewed.
- There were indications in some of the records reviewed that less attention is given to physical health needs of children in the in-home cases than in foster care cases.
- Stakeholders identified lack of Medicaid providers of dental care services and revealed a need for assessment of medical and dental services for children receiving in-home services.
- Reviewers found problems in meeting mental health needs in some cases due to lack of assessments to identify needs. Stakeholders reported that most Mental Health services are difficult to access with long waiting lists, particularly for testing.

KEY FINDINGS FOR SEVEN SYSTEMIC FACTORS

IV. STATEWIDE INFORMATION SYSTEM

Status of Statewide Information System: Substantial Conformity

Strength

The FL DCF has an operational statewide information system that is used to track all children in foster care. CIS (Client Information System) is designed to capture the required data elements and can produce the information required by regulation, namely, status, demographic information, location and goals of children in foster care.

Phase I of HomeSafeNet (SACWIS) is operational statewide except in the Sun Coast Region. This system is designed to capture the required elements of a statewide information system in accordance with federal guidelines.

V. CASE REVIEW SYSTEM

Status of Case Review System: Not in Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- All cases reviewed had written case plans.
- Court hearings and administrative reviews were held timely.
- The Federal time frames were met for the permanency hearing. However, there is some evidence of continuances and the hearings do not always address the key permanency issues.
- The provisions for TPR are in place and there has been an increase in filing for TPR's. It was noted that there are delays in filing in some cases.
- Family Group Conferencing in Model Court promotes family participation in the case planning process.

Areas Needing Improvement

- Although all of the cases reviewed contained written case plans, parents and children are not consistently involved in developing the case plan.
- There were delays in timely filing petitions for termination of parental rights for older children and children with special needs.
- Although foster parents, preadoptive parents, and relative caregivers are receiving notice of hearings, there is no standard procedure of notification. Some received a phone call, while others received written notification.

- Due to a shortage of Guardian ad Litem (GAL), all children are not routinely assigned to a GAL.

VI. QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Status of Quality Assurance System: Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- Counties adhere to licensing standards, which are in place and are applied to all homes licensed by DCF.
- The State is working towards accreditation.
- The State has made efforts to establish quality assurance measures that are consistent with ASFA.
- The quality assurance teams review foster care, protective investigation, protective supervision, the CBC (Community-Based Care), Sheriffs and ASFA compliance in the counties and provide feedback on each case and request immediate corrective action.
- Quarterly reports are also provided on the QA activities.

VII. TRAINING

Status of Training: Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- The PDC (Professional Development Center), a collaboration with Florida International University, provides all pre-service training and most in-service training for child welfare staff. Joint training, involving staff from DCF, foster parents, service providers, Guardians Ad Litem, and in some cases, law enforcement personnel, arranged by the court at the Dependency Court Summit in which about 400 people are trained twice yearly.
- The training for new employees is skills-based in an effort to meet customer needs. The joint MAPP training for caseworkers and foster parents is a positive experience for both groups.

Area Needing Improvement

- Some stakeholders described the in-service training as repetitious, out-of-date, and/or irrelevant for experienced staff.
- The turnover rate has a major effect on stable trained workforce.

VIII. SERVICE ARRAY

Status of Service Array: Not in Substantial Conformity

Strengths

There are examples of unique and exemplary service interventions that are available for families and children in Florida. Some examples are: the use of Telemedicine to evaluate child abuse, Child Advocacy Centers, Drug Court, Domestic Violence Centers, and Healthy Families.

- In one site, the Drug Court makes substance abuse services available
- In one site, there is good coordination with the local agency and the use of military services.

Areas Needing Improvement

- The most critical service need is the availability of foster homes especially for older children.
- The greatest obstacle to the provision of individualized services was the failure to conduct comprehensive assessments when cases were opened.
- There was a shortage of substance abuse treatment centers especially residential centers.
- There are long waiting lists for mental health services for children.
- There are waiting lists to get specialized therapeutic foster homes.
- The frequent use of shelter care does not individualize children's need for appropriate out-of-home care.
- Services were not always individualized to the needs of the children and families.

IX. AGENCY RESPONSIVENESS TO THE COMMUNITY

Status of Agency Responsiveness to the Community: Substantial Conformity

Strengths

- The model court system was viewed as bringing about greater collaboration and coordination among DCF and service providing agencies than had existed prior to the model court.
- There is strong collaboration in the community such as regular meetings between DCF and the court, Child Protection Teams, Child Advocacy Center, and Citizen Review Panels.
- There is collaboration with the tribes through the representative of the Governor's Counsel on Indian Affairs and on the local level.
- There are Community Alliances in every district, which are addressing community-based care. The Alliances have been established to help with the transition to community-based care (privatization). The Alliances consist of the local sheriff, Chief Judge, Superintendent of the school board, director of United Way, Guardian ad Litem, Health Care and District Administrators. The Alliances meet and develop by-laws and address child welfare issues such as permanency and well-being in the local community. The Child Welfare Advisory Committee, an expansion of the Child First Committee, was established to work with the State on its CFSP.
- DCF has several efforts underway to involve community stakeholders in the formulation of plans to improve services to children and families.
- The 1998 Legislative session mandated the state to privatize protective services, adoption and foster care by 2003. Currently four counties have privatized – Sarasota, Manatee, Pinellas and Pasco.

Area Needing Improvement

- Stakeholders reported that they generally have limited involvement in State planning or policy development for child and family service.
- Tribes should be included earlier in the planning process and strengthen the relationship at the State planning level with the recognized tribes.
- There needs to be more coordination of services on individual cases when there are multiple providers.

X. FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT LICENSING, RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

Status of Foster and Adoptive Parent Licensing, Recruitment and Retention: Substantial Conformity.

Strengths

- Licensing standards have been implemented and were applied uniformly to relative and non-relative homes.
- The State complied with all Federal requirements for criminal background clearances.
- Each district has staff designated for recruitment and retention activities for foster parents.
- Child specific recruitment occurs.

Area Needing Improvement

- The biggest challenge is the lack of placement resources. This results in overcrowding especially for adolescent.
- Waivers are given for capacity in order to accommodate sibling groups, teen mothers with babies and children returning to care that were in a home previously. This results in overcrowding.